

# Population Health Matters

## Working Together to Address Obesity: Philadelphia Health Initiative

In healthcare, when you talk about equipping providers, it's rare that you're talking about parents. Yet, when it comes to addressing childhood obesity, parents may be the most important provider of all.

A child's weight is increasingly becoming a primary concern for parents. A survey from the University of Michigan found insufficient exercise and childhood obesity as the two most important concerns parents have regarding their child's health – ranked higher than smoking, drugs and bullying.<sup>1</sup>

But, perhaps even more troubling to parents is what to say about it. According to a WebMD/Sanford Health survey, parents of teens find it more difficult to talk about weight with their children than talking about sex, drugs, alcohol or smoking.<sup>2</sup>

Find that hard to believe? Well, if you are a parent reading this article, how would you answer this question from your child: "Mom and Dad, am I fat?"

Not so easy, is it? While helpful resources on this topic have been in short supply – if available at all – a new tool is available. The STOP Obesity Alliance, in collaboration with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, released a guide to help parents respond to challenging and unanticipated questions about weight from their kids.<sup>3,4,5</sup> *"Weigh In: Talking to Your Children About Weight and Health"* is a free conversation guide that offers parents "real-world" situations and plain language

responses to questions about weight issues, including understanding BMI, body image, bullying, weight bias and family obesity.<sup>6</sup> This research-based guide, reviewed by experts from a cross-section of fields including pediatrics, obesity research, and psychology, provides a framework to better equip parents and caregivers to talk about weight and health in ways that are factual, meaningful and helpful.

There is no question that this is a step – a huge leap, actually – in the right direction. At the same time, I also know it is not enough. As director of the STOP Obesity Alliance, I examine issues regarding weight and health from a three-pronged perspective involving personal, policy and public health concerns. We need to take each into consideration when crafting approaches to address and prevent obesity. That's why I was greatly encouraged when a new, local health initiative in Philadelphia wanted to build upon our national efforts and create a meeting discussion toolkit for local community leaders based on the *Weigh In* guide.<sup>7</sup> The toolkit provides everything a community leader might need to host a small group discussion with parents to help them talk to their kids about weight and health. And, for Philadelphia families, the kit includes a local resource list that identifies places to purchase healthy foods (including dining-out options) and activities for families to enjoy together in the city.

The Philadelphia Health Initiative (PHI), a newly-created and diverse group of stakeholders, is working to create integrated

and measurable efforts in community, workplace and healthcare settings, all designed to prevent and treat obesity and diabetes. Designed to amplify and accelerate valuable work already underway in Philadelphia, ultimately PHI hopes to achieve not only better health locally, but to be a model for how other communities can mobilize and coordinate their unique assets to improve health.

PHI held its first public discussion in May, in which I joined a diverse group of experts including: David B. Nash, MD, MBA, Dean of the Jefferson School of Population Health; Barbara Connors, DO, MPH, Chief Medical Officer of Center for Medicare & Medicaid Services, Region 3; Neil Goldfarb, Executive Director of the Greater Philadelphia Business Coalition on Health; and Giridhar Mallaya, MD, MSHP, the Director of Policy and Planning for the Philadelphia Department of Public Health. The panel talked about some of the great work already underway in Philadelphia and how that work has begun to move the needle on childhood obesity.

I look forward to seeing the change that the PHI will help bring about in Philadelphia – and having the STOP Obesity Alliance take part of this local-area work. ■

**Scott Kahan, MD, MPH**  
*Director, STOP Obesity Alliance*

**To learn more about the PHI or the *Weigh In* discussion toolkit, email [weighinphilly@jefferson.edu](mailto:weighinphilly@jefferson.edu).**

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